



Coordination, Now More Than Ever by Brad Glosserman

What a week! Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro is packing bags for another trip to Pyongyang to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. The U.S. has announced it's rotating troops out of South Korea for combat duty in Iraq. Both moves look suspiciously like unilateral acts that shake alliance commitments. That isn't necessarily so, but a failure by Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul to closely coordinate on these issues guarantees an erosion of the trust that is the foundation of their alliances. Never before has there been such a premium on communication and cooperation between these three governments.

This weekend, Prime Minister Koizumi will make his second trip to Pyongyang. He is looking for a breakthrough in normalization talks between Japan and North Korea. He is likely to get it in the form of the release of family members of Japanese abducted by the North who have since returned home. They were allowed to visit Japan last year, but declined to return to the North – and their families – as promised. Japan has made the relatives' return a priority in negotiations with the North.

Bet on a breakthrough because Koizumi would look like a sucker if he comes home empty-handed. The North is likely to oblige for several reasons. First, Pyongyang thinks this would put Koizumi in its debt. It would give the prime minister a big achievement before July's Upper House ballot and North Korean leaders like to think they influence elections. Second, it would give Tokyo reason to ease up in the six-party talks and be more forthcoming with aid. There is talk of increasing humanitarian assistance and suspending implementation of a new law that restricts remittances to North Korea from Japan.

Third, and perhaps most significant, letting the families go could drive a wedge between Tokyo and Washington. One of the abductees is married to Charles Robert Jenkins, a former U.S. Army sergeant who deserted while on patrol in the demilitarized zone in 1965. If he returns, he risks arrest and imprisonment. Despite repeated entreaties from Japan, the U.S. Department of Defense has shown no willingness to show clemency and let him live with his wife in Japan.

Meanwhile, back on the Peninsula, earlier this week, the U.S. announced it will pull 3,600 troops from the 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division in the ROK to serve in Iraq. U.S. forces in Iraq are overstretched and the move makes sense given U.S. commitments and capabilities. U.S. officials say no decisions have been made whether the shift will lead to a permanent reduction of forces in South Korea, although numerous reports from Washington indicate that they won't return to the ROK.

While neither of these moves *necessarily* threatens U.S. relations with its regional allies, they both look like unilateral initiatives that could undermine those alliances. The Department of Defense's hard-nose attitude toward Jenkins makes the U.S. a villain in the eyes of the Japanese, who are

complaining, after all, about families separated by unfeeling governments. Drawing down U.S. forces in the ROK is hard to reconcile with U.S. accusations that Pyongyang has a secret nuclear weapons program that threatens regional peace and stability. In the supercharged atmosphere surrounding South Korean domestic politics, skeptics and alliance opponents will charge that either the U.S. is hyping a nonexistent threat or pulling U.S. forces out of harm's way in the event of a conflict. Even alliance supporters have to worry about a "security vacuum" in the ROK.

All three governments deny that there is any unilateralism at work. ROK officials say they were notified of the U.S. troop decision on Monday; according to the White House, President Bush discussed the move with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and Koizumi and both expressed "support and understanding." Bush is reportedly praying for the success of Koizumi's mission. U.S. officials have said that Koizumi "made it clear that the trip does not affect Japan's strong and firm support for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program." Nor should it.

Still, perceptions are critical. Reports that the U.S. "informed" the ROK of the move rather than "consulted" it underscore the sensitivities involved, as do fears that North Korea will use Jenkins to drive a wedge between Washington and Tokyo. The stakes are high. It is probable that Pyongyang is ready to make a deal with Koizumi because it's feeling the squeeze. The consensus favoring the "complete, verifiable, and irreversible disarmament" (CVID) of North Korea is proving hard to crack. Now, more than ever, there has to be coordination and communication between Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo.

To ensure that the three governments don't lose their advantage, they must continue to work in step. Part of the work is pure PR. They should raise the profile of the trilateral cooperation and oversight group (TCOG). The three leaders should make more unequivocal statements in favor of CVID and a negotiated resolution of the nuclear crisis. Presidents Bush and Roh should reiterate their commitment to a robust U.S.-ROK alliance. That is especially important as Roh returns to office after the ill-fated impeachment attempt against him and progressives take control of both the executive and legislative branches of government in Seoul.

For its part, the U.S. must make a difficult decision and give Jenkins amnesty. While some say that is the wrong signal to send now – as U.S. troops face charges for misconduct in Iraq – the particulars of this case and the national interest make it *sui generis*. No precedent risks being set. In every endeavor, Washington needs to make it clear to its allies – and especially to the public in those countries – that it is working with them to accomplish shared goals and objectives.

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